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THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE



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James Lane Allen

THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE



AN IDYL OF IMMORTALITY

BY JAMES LANE ALLEN



PORTLAND MAINE
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MDCCCCXIV

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1914

TO THOSE
WHO KNOW THEY HAVE
NO SOLUTION
OF THE UNIVERSE
YET HOPE FOR THE BEST
AND LIVE FOR IT

THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE

In a somewhat different and in a much briefer form *The Last Christmas Tree* appeared several years ago in *The Saturday Evening Post*.



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LIFE on this earth, my children, means warmth. Do not forget that: whatever else it may be, life as we know it is warmth. Every living earthly thing is on fire and every fire is perpetually going out. When the warmth, when the fire, which is within us and which is perpetually going out, goes out for good, that is the end of us. It is the end of us as far as the life which we derive from the planet is ourselves. If our planetary life is our only life, when the planetary fire within us dies out, all of us dies out. If planetary fire be not our only vital flame, vital energy, then planetary

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dust and ashes are not the complete end of us, not the last word of our terrible lovable human story. And if this be true, what next may come, what kind of story will then begin with ourselves as its characters, what sort of existence for us will emerge from planetary extinction — that has always been the one greatest question, solicitude, hope, help, song, prayer of our race. It has never been more a problem than now when we know more about many other things than we have ever known yet can find out nothing about this thing and were never so impatient of our ignorance.

But meantime life on this earth implies warmth and carries warmth: that at least we positively have found out though without knowing what warmth is. Every living terrestrial creature is a candle, is a lamp. The

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rose is a perfumed lamp and when its bowl is without oil, that inimitable lamp so silently built to give off for a little while a few serene rays of vestal beauty as silently falls to pieces. The pine tree is a wild candle poised on a mountain table. The eagle is a winged candle burning to cinders on a peak of air. The albatross is a floating conflagration with all the ineffectual sea drenching its back and breast. The polar bear is a four-branch candle in a candlestick of snow. We human beings are laughing and tear-dripping candles, descending swiftly to our sockets. The sun and the stars are candles, whirling golden candles in the night of the universe, a long, long night. One by one they too burn down at those brief intervals which we with our puny measurements call ages. The whole myriad-lighted starry infi-

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nite, as far as we know, is a mere ballroom arranged for somebody's pleasure, somebody's dancing. The candles may last as long as the master of the revels requires them ; and then perhaps at some strange daybreak of which we can conceive naught, they will go out to the final one — all go out at the coming-on of day. A strange day indeed without any suns, without any stars, these having been consumed during the ancient night. What our human race has always most wished to know, most liked to believe, is that Nature, the whole universe of Nature, is itself but a troubled night of being ; and that when Nature has come to some kind of end, the night of existence will have come to an end also. Beyond will have to be some kind of day, endless day. Our human race has always believed or has

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tried to believe that on the Natureward confines of that day it will be discovered, assembled there, waiting there, having journeyed thither somehow: no matter how, so it arrive. For however dull and petty man may be, however despicable, brutish, abandoned, there has been no lack of sublimity in his vision, in his faith, of what he is to be: that after the last star has gone out in the night of Nature, the orb of his soul will have but begun to flash the immortality of its dawn.

Once and for an immeasurable time the whole earth was warm, and life on it being warmth, the life on it was everywhere. That was Nature's particular hour of the night just then—it called for a warm earth completely covered with life. Then one day something took place that had never

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taken place before. For the first time, for the very first time in the experience of the earth, out of one of its clouds there began to fall, not what had always fallen in the past, drops of rain, but tiny white crystals. At first they were few; then more and more; then myriads, myriads, myriads, until the air grew grey with the thick host of them. Finally the scene became as if the sky were the floor of the desert, an upper inverted desert floor covered with fine white sand, with sand-dunes; and the winds, sweeping and roaring across this desert floor, lifted the dunes, scattered them and swept them along: avalanches of white sand, cloudy landslides of white sand—blown toward the earth underneath. No creature there below had ever seen the like; and as those avalanches slid down on their heads and backs,

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tumult, fear, flight followed. Perhaps caught in the raging, roaring tempest, perhaps having lost its way, some bird of brilliant-red plumage flew round and round like a wandering ball of fire, uttering its cry of bewilderment, of helplessness, of its fate — the prophetic note of the fate of everything.

When the first of these strange cold white crystals struck the warm earth, at once they vanished. So that for a while the vast catastrophe looked like some unfeeling prank of the clouds, some too grave a trick, heartless deception. But faster than the first could melt, others came, more, more, until the later ones arrived before the earlier ones had disappeared. And then they began to stay where they fell. They began to stay and to pile up one on another; they began to make a white spot, a frozen spot. We

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know nothing as to how and when and where; yet we are bound to understand that some time there was the first snowcloud, somewhere the first snowstorm, the first snowbank.

No human eye beheld it: there was to be no human eye for untold ages yet. But there was one who saw, one who was present, one who had brought it to pass — Time; and now that the first white spot was prepared and ready like some new flat marble slab, bordered round with the earth's green and awaiting humanwise its due inscription, Time glanced at it, approved it, stepped forward and stooping down wrote three words in the sand — in the white sand of the sky:

HIC JACET TERRA.



SINCE the unknown day of the first unknown snow-bank, the earth has made no revolution, has not once turned over from side to side without keeping undeviatingly in the straight road toward the fulfilment of that epitaph, Time's epitaph. Never since then, though fighting with all its fires, has it been able to drive off that pallid visitant from outer space, never has it been able to prevent the persistent return of that appalling stranger. For the little white spot would not out, would not out for good. If it disappeared in one place, it reappeared in another place. And it invariably brought along more of its kind: each visitant seemed to bring a mate, a family, a tribe. In the

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blossoming zones of the earth's surface where we spend our dream-life of pain and joy, if a solitary bee find its way to a new field in spring, the summer will be likely to bring the swarm. If a migratory bird by some deviation of route alight on a strange continent or island, the species may some day cover that continent or island. And those first downward flights from the clouds began to be followed by other flights, by vaster flocks and flights. And the earth began to have a new trouble.

She, our very human Mother, had from the first had enough troubles of her own, as without exception we her very human children have had enough of ours. Sometimes her stories had begun well but each of them as it ended ended badly. As we now look back upon any one of these finished

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stories of hers, we may derive some satisfaction from seeing that it possessed the art, the logic, of being inevitable. But that will be our only joy. Her great novels, her great epics, have uniformly been stupendous, immeasurable cataclysms, earth-tragedies. But among them all not one has possessed the awful beauty, the chaste splendor, the universality, of this new trouble of hers with the tiny crystal.

We are well accustomed as we look out upon Nature at close range to see great creatures harrassed by little creatures. The lot of each big one seems to be in the keeping of some little one, which never quits it, nags it, stings it, wears it out, drives it desperate, makes life somewhat a burden to it and death somewhat a relief. But no one of us has ever seen

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so huge and powerful a thing as a whole round world pitilessly stalked from age to age, run down, overcome inch by inch, routed out of a fair destiny by such a mite of a tormentor as a crystal. Nowhere have we witnessed so disproportionate a conflict as that between a sphere and a snowflake.

Why, some wintry day when you in overcoat and gloves are tramping comfortably across your fields on which snow is falling, stop and draw off one of your gloves, and holding out your hand, catch one of these little terrors, one of these dread arrows from the unseen quiver of all whiteness. Intercept it in its passage towards the earth and let it strike you, strike your palm, instead of striking the Mother who has been struck so often. One instant after it has reached your palm

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it has dropped its disguise and has turned into its old familiar self, a rain-drop, a drop of dew. That is, under the influence of the warmth of your planetary fire, it has returned to its youth. For snow is the old age of water. Cloud, mist, rain, dew — these all are young: their old age is ice. When a dewdrop arranges itself for perpetuity, disposes itself in orderly fashion never to change again, stretches itself out in its *rigor mortis*, it has become a crystal. It has given up the ghost and has become a ghost — it has become snow, the ghost of the brook, the ghost of the rain.


Now this — just this — was the Earth's new trouble; and this ever since has been her increasing trouble and her losing fight: that over vaster and vaster regions of her surface she has lost the power to work the miracle

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of the resurrection — to bid the dead arise, take back its life, and having burst from its white sepulchre ascend again to the heavens. This is the trouble of our great Mother — that she has been fighting against old age as we her children fight against it. Old age has been descending upon her from the clouds; and wherever she has not been able to give back to old age its youth, there old age has stayed; and wherever on the earth old age has stayed, there the earth itself has become old.

And now for us who live on the earth to-day, looking out upon the battle between the planet and the snowflake, how fares the fighting?



F you should start from your home in our north-temperate latitude and travel northward steadily on and on, after a while you would find that the air gradually grows colder, myriads of living things begin to be left behind; fewer and fewer remain; those that do remain, whether animals or birds or flowers, begin to lose gorgeous color, begin to become white. The countless sounds of living things begin to die out. Everything is changed, colors are gone, songs have ceased. On and on you journey and always you are traveling towards silence, toward the white. And at last you come to the kingdom of the crystal, to the reign of the snowflake, to the old age of the earth; you come to one

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of the battlefields where the snowflake has conquered the planet. Perhaps on this northward journey the last living thing you saw in Nature was the evergreen—thriving there in unconquerable youth on the margin of unconquerable death.

If you should start from your home and travel southward, you would at first cross land after land where it grew warmer; but if you kept on, you would at last begin to recognize all that you had seen on your northward journey: life failing, colors fading, the living harmonies of the earth replaced by the discords of Nature's lifeless forces: pinnacles of ice, deserts of snow. Again on those boundaries of desolation you would see the sign of the world's youth—its evergreen: only that sign.

If, starting from your home for the

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third time, you could rise straight into the air, higher, higher, as though you were climbing the side of an aerial mountain, you would at last find that you had ascended the aerial mountain to a height where, were it a real mountain, it would be capped with snow, capped with perpetual snow. For all round the earth wherever its actual mountains are high enough, their summits pierce the level of eternal cold: above us everywhere lies the unseen land of eternal cold. And there again near those summits your eye, searching for some mitigation of the solitude, would come upon the evergreen.

Some time in the future, we do not know when, but some time the cold at the north will have moved so far southward; the cold at the south will have moved so far northward; the

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cold in the upper air will have moved so far downward, that the three will meet and when they meet there will be for the earth one whiteness, one silence — rest: all troubled or untroubled things will be at rest.



GREAT time had passed,
how great no one knew;
there was none to measure it.

It was twilight and it was snowing. On a steep mountain's side near its bald summit thousands of feet above the line that any other living thing had ever crossed, stood two glorious fir trees, strongest and last of their race. They had climbed out of the valley below to this height and had so rooted themselves in rock and soil that the wildest gales had never been able to dislodge them. Now the two occupied that beetling cliff as the final sentinels of Nature. They were like two soldiers stationed at the farthest outpost against the enemy and remaining faithful after all they stood for had perished.

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The two firs looked out toward the land in one direction. At the foot of the mountain in old human times a village had thriven, had worked and played ; church spires had risen, bridal candles had twinkled at twilight, children had played at snowball. In the opposite direction the trees looked out upon the ocean, once the rolling blue ocean singing its great song but level now or ice-roughened and white and still — its voice hushed with all other voices, the roar of its battleships silenced long ago.

The two comrade trees had the strange wisdom of their race, ages old and gathered into them through untold generations. They had their memories, their sympathies ; they reached one another with language past our understanding. One fir grew lower on the mountainside than the other ;

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it was like a man so stationed on a declivity that his head barely reaches to the shoulder of another man higher up.

A slow bitter wind wandered through their boughs, smote their delicate boughs as though these were strings of harps. The two firs became like harpers of old with whitened locks and long hoary beards, harpers who never tire of the past, of great days gone by.

The fir below, as the snowflakes became thicker on its locks and sifted in more closely about its neck, shook itself loose from them and spoke :

“Comrade, the end for us draws near ; the snow creeps up. To-night it will place its cap on my head. I shall close my eyes and follow all things into their sleep.”

“Yes,” responded the fir above,

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“follow all things into their sleep. If all things were thus to sleep at last, why were they ever awakened? It is a mystery.”

The slow wind caught the words and bore them outward across the land and outward across the sea :

“Mystery — mystery — mystery.”

Twilight deepened. The clouds trailed through the trees ; the flakes were formed amid the branches ; it was no longer the fall of the snow : the ice-drops rested where they were formed.

At intervals, surrounded by clouds and darkness, the low communings of the two trees went on :

“Where now is he, the strange human one, he of the long thoughts and the brief shadow?”

“He thought he was immortal ; to him everything else on the earth

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perished but he was immortal. Where is he now?"

"Once when he was very proud he said that he had a Creator who made him to lie down in green pastures."

"He lies in white pastures. All the millions of his race lie in white pastures, not green pastures."

"Our fathers, the evergreens, came forth on the earth countless ages before he appeared; and we are still here untold ages since he disappeared — leaving not a trace of himself behind."

"The most fragile of the mosses was born before he was born and it outlasted him."

"The frailest fern was not so perishable."

"Yet he believed that he should have eternal youth."

"That his race would return

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to some Power who had sent it forth."

"That he was ever being borne onward to some far off divine event where there was justice."

"Where there was justice for all."

"He so loved justice yet so withheld justice."

"It was the first thing he demanded and the last thing he meted out."

Darkness now overhung the mountain top, deep night above. At intervals the firs, being fast covered with snow, went on with their broken talk which wandered back and forth along the track of ages. They had but a few minutes for their thoughts of the ages and they lingered here and there as they willed.

"This is part of the mystery : if he were but the earth's dust and ashes, like everything else, how could it be

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so? How could the earth which is without sin breed in his race so many sinners? How could the earth, since it speaks only the truth, have been the father of all his lies? How, without sorrow, could it have been the mother of his sorrows? The earth never felt joy; how could it have made him joy incarnate? What does the earth know of greatness yet it made him great. How could that be?"

"It is part of the mystery."

"Had they realized how alone in the universe they were, would they not have turned to each other for happiness?"

"Would not all have helped each?"

"Would not each have helped all?"

"The longest of their rivers was the river of their own blood."

"If they could have caught it in the basin of some empty sea, they could

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have floated on it all their fleets of battleships."

Once in the night they spoke together :

"And all his gods, his many gods in many lands with many faces—they all sleep now in their ancient temples ; it is at last the true twilight of the gods."

"They set shepherds over them. Then the shepherds declared themselves appointed by the Creator of the universe to lead other men as their sheep : now what difference is there between the sheep and the shepherds ?"

"The shepherds lie with the sheep in the same white pasture. They were all sheep : they had no shepherd."

"And their sins were the sins of sheep, but the sins of silly sheep."

"Still, what think you became of

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all that men did? How could all that perish? It was so solid, so enduring; it was so splendid; it seemed worthy to be immortal."

"What became of Science? How could all that Science was come to naught?"

"And his Art — that inner light of himself which was Art? Do his pictures hang nowhere? Is his music never to be heard again?"

"And the love that was in him — was it but a blind force rising into him as the power of the clods?"

"What became of the woman who threw herself away for love: did she find no one at last to weep at the feet of, no one who would free her soul from her body?"

"What became of the man who was false: did he ever find a Power that could make him true?"

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“What became of the man who threw himself away in being true : did any Power ever make good to him his ruin ?”

“The young soldier who poured out his life's blood for his country : was he never to have any country ?”

On the long road of the ages here and there they loitered with their thoughts :

“But he did fill the world with a great light of himself, with the splendor of what he was.”

“And yet it was but half his life, half his glory. He forever dwelt in less than half of the light of his race : the rest he himself put out yet never knew the darkness it left him in. More than half his light he put out in neglected childhood and in youth slain on the battlefield.”

“All the greatest names up and

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down the terrible field of his history — there were just as many that he threw away : he dwelt in half the light of his race.”

If there had been a clock to measure the hour it must now have been near midnight as it was reckoned in old human times. Suddenly the fir below spoke out hopefully :

“ May they not after all be gathered elsewhere, strangely altered yet the same ? Is some other star their safe habitation ? Were they right, sheep that they were, in thinking themselves immortal ? Are they now in some other world ? ”

“ What know we ? What knew he ? That was the mystery.”

The winds caught the word and carried it away :

“ Mystery — mystery — mystery.”

“ Our fathers remembered the day

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when he went into the woods and cut down one of our people and took it into his house. On the evergreen he set the star: they were for his youth and his immortality. Around those emblems children pressed their faces and reaching out plucked gifts from the branches. The myriads and myriads of the children! What became of them?"

"Be still!" whispered the fir tree above. "At that moment, while you spoke, I felt the soft fingers of a child searching my boughs. Was not this what in human times they called Christmas Eve? There they are again, the fingers of a child!"

"Hearken!" whispered the fir below. "Down in the valley elfin horns are blowing and elfin drums beat. Do you not hear them — faint and far away. And that sound —

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was it not the bells of the reindeer !
It passed : it was a wandering soul of
Christmas."

"But they are all around me! They
are all around you! Myriads and
myriads are coming, are on the way
toward us, the last of their Christmas
trees. The souls of all children,
wide-awake, are gathering about us
ere we pass into the earth's sleep."

"The souls of the children visit us
ere we sleep."

Not long after this the fir standing
below spoke for the last time :

"Comrade, it is the end for me.
The cap of snow is on my head. I
follow all things."

The snow closed over it.

The other fir now stood alone.
The snow crept higher and higher.
Late in the long night it communed
once more, solitary :

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“I, then, close the train of earthly things. And I was the emblem of immortality; let the highest be the last to perish! Power, that put forth all things for a purpose, you have fulfilled, without explaining it, that purpose. I follow all things into their sleep.”

The sun rose clear: all the mountain tops were white and cold and at peace.

The long war between the crystal and the planet was over: the snowflake had conquered.

The earth was dead.



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